

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 25, 2010

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We write to express our continued concern about inhumane treatment of animals at slaughter plants around the country. While we applaud your decision last year to close the regulatory loophole that allowed for the slaughter of non-ambulatory (“downer”) cattle, we believe that more must be done to ensure a safe and healthy food supply for American families, and to prevent cruel and inhumane treatment of animals.

The current system suffers from two fundamental shortcomings: remaining gaps in humane handling regulations, and weaknesses in the Food Safety and Inspection Service’s (FSIS) oversight and enforcement of existing rules. Despite recent progress in the regulations governing humane handling, substantial loopholes still exist that allow for inhumane treatment which jeopardizes the health and safety of our food supply, and incentivizes cruel practices on animals. Moreover, many of the existing provisions of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act are under-enforced, sidestepped or ignored. Last fall’s incident at Bushway Packing, Inc.—where, under the supervision of a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspector, newborn calves were subjected to kicking, repeated electric shock, skinning alive and other cruelties—exemplifies the type of violations of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act that the USDA and FSIS should be preventing. To address these problems, we call for not only stricter enforcement, but for new and more comprehensive regulations to make certain our food processing is safe, healthy, and humane.


Specifically, we urge the USDA to expand on last years downed cattle decision and adopt a rule that prohibits *any* downed animal from entering the food supply, and closes the loophole that exists for downed calves. Allowing downed animals into our food supply poses a substantial threat to public health; eliminating this unnecessary and potentially catastrophic risk would improve consumer confidence and help ensure a safe and healthy food system. As part of this regulation, we also recommend that the USDA explicitly ban all egregious acts of cruelty on disabled or injured animals, including forceful striking with an object, dragging, ramming with machinery, use of electric shock or water pressure, and other extreme methods. Such actions are senseless, useless and cruel, and—as the Bushway incident, and the 2008 Hallmark Meat Packing Co. incident before it clearly demonstrate—it is painfully necessary to ensure without qualification that these acts shall have no place in our agricultural system.

Further, while these reforms are desperately needed, they will do little to improve food safety and animal welfare if not accompanied by stricter enforcement standards. In order to improve compliance, ensure transparency, and restore confidence, we ask the USDA to improve inspector training on humane handling requirements; expand inspector presence to allow continuous observation of live animals as they are offloaded, moved through pens and chutes, and handled in stunning areas and on the bleed line; and mandate that inspectors report all humane handling violations. Further, so that violations can be more readily exposed and quickly corrected, we ask the USDA to establish an ombudsman to provide an avenue for whistle blower concerns and help ensure that inspectors can carry out their responsibilities without undue interference.


These reforms would go a long way toward improving USDA's enforcement of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act and protecting America's food supply. We are confident that this administration will continue to strengthen and improve the standards for food safety and animal welfare, and we stand ready to assist you in these important efforts.

Thank you for your consideration of our requests.

Sincerely,


Gary L. Ackerman
Member of Congress


Barney Frank
Member of Congress


John J. Hall
Member of Congress

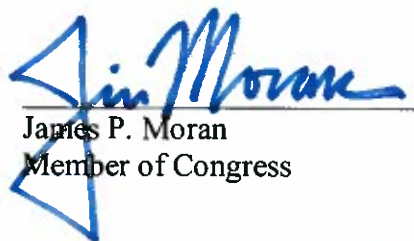

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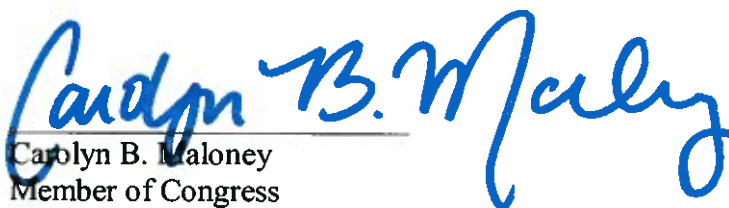
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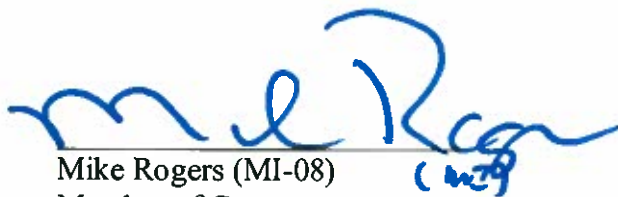
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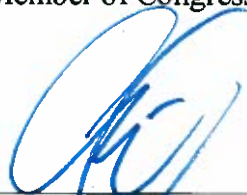
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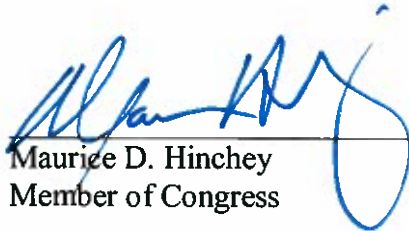
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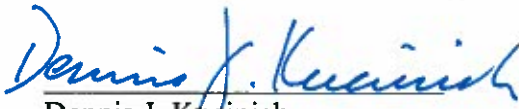
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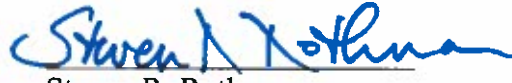
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